ROBERT LEWIS DABNEY

Prince Among Theologians and Men

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ROBERT LEWIS DABNEY

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PRINCE AMONG THEOLOGIANS AND MEN.

A Memorial Address delivered before
West Hanover Presbytery
At its Fall Meeting, 1936, in
Stonewall Church, Appomattox County,
Virginia,
Celebrating the Jubilee Year
of the
FOUNDING
of the
SOUTHERN PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
in 1861

By
Henry M. Woods

"We have heard with our ears, O God, our fathers have told us, what work Thou didst in their days, in the times of old. Our fathers trusted in Thee, and Thou didst deliver them. They cried unto Thee and were delivered; they trusted in Thee, and were not confounded".

"In all these things, we are more than Conquerors through Him that loved us."

"After this it was noised abroad that Mr. Valiant-for-Truth was sent for by a summons. Then said he: "I am going to my Father's; and though with great difficulty I have got me hither, yet now I do not repent me of all the trouble I have been at to arrive where I am. My sword I give to him that shall succeed me in my pilgrimage; my marks and scars I carry with me, to be a witness for me that I have fought His battles who will now be my Rewarder. When the day that he must go hence was come, many accompanied him to the riverside, into which as he went, he said, 'Death, where is thy sting?' and as he went down deeper, he said, 'Grave, where is thy victory?' So he passed over, and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side!"

Thou wast their Rock, their fortress and their might,
Thou, Lord, their Captain in the well fought fight,
Thou, in the darkness drear, their one true Light,
Alleluia!

O may Thy soldiers, faithful, true and bold,
Fight as the saints who nobly fought of old,
And win with them the victor's Crown of gold,
Alleluia!

ROBERT LEWIS DABNEY,

PRINCE AMONG THEOLOGIANS AND MEN.

During this Jubilee Year of our Southern Presbyterian Church we are grateful that the history of several of our great leaders of 1861-65 and their abundant labors have been placed before the Church in addresses, and we greatly venerate the character and attainments of these men. It is a matter of surprise and regret, however, that one of our leading heroes has been omitted, for so great have been his services to Church and Country that without him the picture of the times would be altogether incomplete. The writer of this paper counts it a privilege to pay this humble tribute, and lay a wreath of evergreen on the grave of our beloved teacher and friend.

Dr. Thomas Carey Johnson in his admirable Life of Dabney writes: "There were giants in those days, stars of magnitude, and among them all not a greater giant than R. L. Dabney." Dr. Moses D. Hoge, speaking at Dr. Dabney's funeral, said there were three great men of 1861, "a triumvirate, with which God had adorned our Southern Church," Thornwell, Dabney and Palmer. These opinions were heartily endorsed by mighty men of the Church, like Doctors Strickler, William Stoddart, Clement Vaughn, Murkland, Finley, James Power Smith, Robert Kerr, Hale Houston, Abner Hopkins, and by many others who had been Dr. Dabney's students and who really knew him.

Robert L. Dabney was born in 1820, from French Huguenot stock, the d'Aubigné family, to which the distinguished author of the History of the Protestant Reformation belonged. His father was Col. Charles Dabney, a prominent lawyer of Louisa County, Virginia, who died when Robert was only thirteen years old. Young Dabney began life as a student of Rev. James Wharey in what was called an Open Field School, of which the boy wrote to his mother that "there were good teachers and plenty of birch." His statement recalls a remark attributed to Dr. Robert J. Breckenridge, who declared he was "raised on Shorter Catechism and switch!"

In 1836 young Dabney entered Hampden-Sydney College, where he made the highest mark in his classes and was a fellow student of Moses Hoge, J. G. Shepperson, Thomas S. Bocock, who became Speaker of the Confederate Congress; W. T. Richardson, editor of the Central Presbyterian, and other outstanding men. It was while he was at Hampden-Sydney that Robert Dabney was converted, at seventeen years of age. In 1839 he entered the University of Virginia and graduated as Master of Arts in 1842. From 1842 to 1844 Dabney taught school and managed his

mother's farm. Deciding to study for the ministry, he was introduced to the Faculty of Union Seminary, then at Hampden-Sydney, by a letter from Dr. William S. Plumer, pastor of the First Church of Richmond, and was taken under care of West Hanover Presbytery. The writer once heard Dr. Dabney say that in the Seminary he owed a great debt to Dr. Francis Sampson, who was his ablest and most loved professor.

Licensed in May 1846, he was put in charge of Providence Church in Louisa, near his mother's home, whence he was called to be pastor of Tinkling Spring Church in Augusta County. In March 1852, Dr. Dabney was elected professor in Union Seminary, where he remained for over thirty years, first filling the chair of Church History and Polity, which was afterward filled by that ideal Christian and teacher, Thomas E. Peck, and later that of Systematic Theology; and was also co-pastor of College Church. Meanwhile he often wrote for the Southern Presbyterian Review, and as Dr. Carey Johnson remarks, "He was destined by his writings to bring the philosophical and theological world into debt to God for him, and while at the Seminary he was to figure as a patriot and soldier!"

In 1856, in company with Thornwell, Rice, Plumer and William Hoge, he was sent as commissioner to the General Assembly, which met in New York City. In 1857, in addition to Seminary duties, he taught mental and moral philosophy in Hampden-Sydney College, and was elected to its Presidency, which, however, he did not accept. In 1858 he was called to New York to preach the annual sermon for the Foreign Mission Board, using John 4:35 as his text, "The world white unto the harvest." Of this sermon Dr. John A. Broadus, a most competent judge, said it was "one of the most powerful with which he was acquainted."

In his domestic life Dr. Dabney was much blessed. His devoted wife was Lavinia Morrison, for whom he had deep affection. Six sons were born of this union, three of whom lived to maturity. The eldest, Dr. Charles W. Dabney, became distinguished as an educator, first as President of the University of Tennessee, later as President of the University of Cincinnati. The other two sons were Samuel B. and Lewis Meriwether, both of whom became leading lawyers in Texas.

When the dark cloud of Civil War settled over our land, Dr. Dabney exerted himself to allay excitement and preserve peace and the Union. His trenchant articles written at that time met with warm commendation in the North as well as in the South. True to the Constitution and its doctrine of the Sovereignty of States, he enlisted in the Confederate Army as chaplain, and became General Stonewall Jackson's Chief of Staff. More than once he distinguised himself for coolness and courage, and near Port Republic in the Valley campaign his prompt action averted disaster from

the army, for which his modesty alone prevented him from receiving the credit he deserved.

In 1883 his health being impaired and hoping to find relief in a milder climate, Dr. Dabney resigned his professorship in Union Seminary, and accepted the chair of Moral Philosophy in the University of Texas, where he continued to render eminent service until failing eyesight and health necessitated his retirement. Even after the total loss of his eyesight, he continued active in preaching, and delivered several series of lectures in Southern colleges and Austin Seminary, which were highly appreciated. He finally passed away at Victoria, Texas, January 3, 1898, in the seventy ninth year of his age, and was buried in the cemetery at Hampden-Sydney, where so many of God's illustrious saints sleep until the resurrection morn.

From boyhood the writer had the privilege of knowing Dr. Dabney well, for he was a comparatively frequent visitor in the home, and was a welcome preacher in our father's church in Charlottesville, as he was also in the chapel of the University of Virginia.

For the greater part of his life Dr. Dabney was a member of West Hanover Presbytery, where he proved to be, as in all Church Courts, a tower of strength. Who can forget that dignified, majestic figure in Confederate grey overcoat and cape, the long grey beard and brilliant dark eyes, and the simplicity, humility and kindly courtesy, which always marked his intercourse, even with his youngest brethren?

Dr. Dabney was a man of intense feeling. Like St. John, he was by nature a Boanerges. Some who did not know him well might call him stern or severe. True, he had a Pauline hatred of falsehood and injustice, but would he not have been more than human if his indignation had never overflowed when he saw his beloved South in Reconstruction days oppressed by unscrupulous political adventurers? Is it not beautiful to see the power of Divine grace refining and ennobling a strong character, just as the mellow light of the evening sun softens and beautifies the outline of a towering granite peak? Especially was this true as blindness came upon him. His close friends said it was moving to note his growth in Christlikeness, in patience, in thoughtful kindness, and in cheerfully bowing to the Father's will.

Robert L. Dabney had true greatness.

He was a matchless teacher. He possessed a clear, powerful intellect, which grasped the substance of the most profound philosophical themes and made them plain. He had had that close contact with men, that practical experience of affairs, which enabled him to present difficult subjects in their relation to the thought and needs of every-day life. He exemplified the difference between a learned book-worm, who knew his

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subject only from a theoretical viewpoint, and the profound master who presented it in relation to the actual experience of his hearers. Dr. Dabney had that rare gift of making systematic theology not a study of dry bones, but a living system, most interesting and instructive, because throbbing with reality and power. Dr. W. G. T. Shedd of Union Seminary, New York, in the old days, himself an acute and learned scholar, once said that in his judgment Dr. Dabney was the greatest living theologian.

Dr. Dabney was also a mighty preacher of the Gospel. He was not the polished orator that Moses Hoge, or Thornwell, or B. M. Palmer, was. He was more like the Prophet Elijah, rugged, but at times sublimely eloquent. Who could forget his thrilling sermon, analyzing the relation of Human Free Agency to the Divine Will, on Psalm 110:3, "Thy people shall be willing in the Day of Thy Power"? Or his sublime description of Elijah and the prophets of Baal, a challenge so needed at the present, "If the Lord be God, Follow Him! The God that answers by fire, let Him be God!" Real eloquence never rose to greater heights than in these and similar discourses.

Not only was Robert L. Dabney the matchless teacher and the eloquent preacher, but he was the kind, thoughtful friend, especially to those in trouble. He was wonderfully considerate and patient toward his students. The writer has seen other professors, good men, grow irritated and reprimand students in the presence of the class. Dr. Dabney never did so. During two years the writer never once saw our beloved teacher lose his poise, or speak to a student in a manner which was not considerate.

If a student were sick, Dr. Dabney would be the first to call and sympathize with him. And he did many acts of kindness, of which the public never knew. The writer, being late in entering the Seminary his first year, found himself possessed of the poorest, coldest room in the building, a bare floor, no easy chair and a poor oil lamp. No mention was made of it, but within a few days there came a nice new carpet, an easy chair, and a fine student's lamp! Dr. Dabney had quietly written to the Ladies' Society of the Charlottesville Church, and they had generously furnished the room. And similar kindness was shown to many others.

During our Seminary days Mrs. Stonewall Jackson and her daughter, Julia, came to visit "the Hill". It was a beautiful sight to see Dr. Dabney's devotion to both of them. No gallant knight of old was ever more attentive to fair lady than was the Chief of Staff to Julia Jackson, the only child of his beloved leader.

In spite of his grave exterior, Dr. Dabney was a man of tender sympathy for those in sorrow. Mrs. M. J. Bocock, widow of Dr. John H. Bocock, wrote of a visit Dr. Dabney paid to the parents of a dying child in Wash-

ington. "He walked to the bedside of the child, kneeling near the mother, and gave way to a flood of tears, such as I then thought I had never seen a man weep. Then he offered up such a prayer as you can well imagine that great tender heart, so recently bereaved, would offer for the afflicted parents and the precious child then almost in the Saviour's arms."

What lessons there are that we may learn in this Jubilee Year from those grand old Christian heroes!

First, Robert L. Dabney and his colleagues were men of deep convictions. They believed the Gospel with all their hearts. They did not dally with unbelief, nor only partly believe the Word of God. Does not our restless, superficially active age need their firm hold of the Truth? How many there are, even ministers, who seem to have only a feeble grasp of the Christian Faith, not certain where they stand!

Dr. Dabney not only had deep convictions, but the courage to stand for them, and if need be, to die for them. He refused to compromise, he did not fear unpopularity, nor was he ever guided by policy or self-interest. He obeyed God rather than man. Is not this what the Church needs today above all else? The example of those heroes says to us now, "Preachers! Elders! Union and multiplying Church machinery will not cure our ills, but rather increase them! *Stand like a stonewall for God's Word, the whole Bible! He never changes! His truth never changes!* Teach God's love, yes, but also preach the wrath of God against sin, the awful doom of those who reject Christ's offer of mercy! *Warn against error: it robs men of faith and eternal life!*"

Robert Dabney also teaches us humility, exalting God, abasing self. The corn of wheat, Self, must fall into the ground and die, that the indwelling Christ may bring forth much fruit in us and through us! *"Not I, but Christ."*

Again, our brethren of '61-'65 were men of prayer. The fires of Civil War, their dangers and sorrows, drove them to the Throne of Grace and kept them there. The Southern Presbyterian Church was born in prayer, and has lived by prayer. *Lord, this Jubilee Year, give our people the true spirit of prayer! Grant Thy Church a great Holy Spirit revival, the power of the living God cleansing and transforming us!* We pray for West Hanover Presbytery, and our whole Church. We pray for the 1,050 churches in our Southern Assembly, which reported no souls saved last year.

"O Lord, revive Thy work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make known; in wrath remember mercy."

"They climbed the steep ascent to heaven
Through peril, toil and pain,
O God, to us may grace be given
To follow in their train!"